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s Lithuania Good for Us?

The Andy Warhol rule of celebrity is being applied to Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union. Lithuania may end up being famous, dominating the public consciousness, for only 15 days. Then it's the turn of some other place or problem—is Estonia next?—to have its moment in the international sun.

This is Gorbachev's fate: having embarked on reform, he has committed his country to a wrenching crisis after another for an indefinite time. Each new upheaval poses seemingly insoluble challenges to the leadership, the institutions, the national and social fabric. Each is not so much solved as partly assuaged, partly evaded and then not so much put aside as overtaken by the next.

At each stage as this process unfolds, we will have the same three questions. Is it good for the Lithuanians, the consumers, the writers, the environment, the economy—whoever or whatever? Is it good for Gorbachev? Is it good for us?

Only the last question is familiar. The first two are "new," characteristic of the age we now are in. Lithuania has provided our most strenuous exercise so far in balancing these questions. But given the chaotic rush of events in the Soviet Union, more strenuous tests of our judgment and equilibrium are likely to come.

Is what's happening in Lithuania good for Lithuania? The impatient, elected Lithuanian leadership chose the dangerous do-it-yourself fast track to independence over the dangerous slower track of negotiation with Moscow. There was inevitability as well as justice and drama in its choice, but it would have been hard to say in advance which track was going to be more uncertain.

Still, tanks in the streets do not crush—they whet—the expectation that Lithuania is going to be free. Whatever Gorbachev fails to yield at the moment, he will be asked to yield in the near future. This is so because, I think, he does not really expect to tuck Lithuania permanently back into the Soviet fold. He is trying to assert enough central authority to make the inner Soviet empire's inevitable loosening and/or incipient disintegration somewhat orderly. Lithuania is the likely first beneficiary of the now-heightened pressure on him to show he is no Brezhnev, no Khrushchev.

Is the Lithuanian passage good for Gorbachev? He let the crisis drift, then improvised to catch up, then got ugly: a sobering performance. But if he can shift Baltic events back into political channels he will have reasserted the sort of leadership that will let him lurch on and face the waves of nationality challenges lying ahead.

Meanwhile he will be able to resume the conduct of a foreign policy whose larger concrete payoffs, in allowing him to shift resources and energies to domestic purposes, are only now coming within reach. And just in time: the economy is broken, and people are scared that he's losing control.

He has just arranged for himself the political powers and the political structure that he intends to use to make economic perestroika more than a slogan. Exit the image of Gorbachev as masterful international statesman. Enter the embattled domestic politician. This is his crucial role. He doesn't have to win or dazzle every time. He has to show he has the stuff for the long haul.

Is Lithuania good for the United States? Next to Gorbachev's, Bush's choices have been small and easy; so much more is at stake for the Russian. Bush simply needs to wiggle through, which means keeping Lithuania's independence chances alive for a later day, preventing a loss of momentum in Soviet-American relations and holding his domestic political base intact.

By the familiar Cold War theory of "the worse the better," Gorbachev's embarrassments, costs and distractions are to the American advantage: all these things reduce the Soviet threat. This theory has its lingering appeal, but the view increasingly visible at the top of the Bush administration is that it is Gorbachev's successes and achievements, not his failures, that now diminish the Soviet threat. The larger, longer-term American advantage, it is thought, lies in the Soviet Union's becoming a plausibly democratic society that works. Therein lies the ultimate irreversibility.

But along the way there will no doubt come one, two, many Lithuanias—many crises of the Soviet system, many invitations to disaster. They reflect, however, not simply the system's flaws but the very method Gorbachev has chosen to revive it—the weakening of central authority to stir initiative and renewal. It's not over until it's over.